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# A Man for the Times: Jesus and the Abgar Correspondence in Eusebius of Caesarea's *Ecclesiastical History*<sup>1</sup>

## I. Introduction

'If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken  
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools'

Rudyard Kipling, *If*

Perhaps the most extraordinary story about Jesus Christ to survive from antiquity is one of the least often told. It runs as follows. Towards the end of his life, Jesus' reputation has spread out from Palestine and reaches the terminally ill Abgar V (also known as Abgar the Black), toparch of Edessa, capital city of the kingdom of Osroëne. Abgar writes to Jesus requesting that he visit Edessa and heal him. In return he offers sanctuary from the Jews and shared rule of his city. The story preserves the text of both this letter and Jesus' reply, in which he Jesus declines to visit (citing his upcoming engagements in Jerusalem) but promises to send a disciple in his stead. After Jesus' death the apostle Thomas is moved by divine impulse to send Thaddaeus, one of the seventy (*Luke* 10:1-24), to Edessa.<sup>2</sup> Escorted to Abgar's court Thaddaeus cures him along with one Abdu son of Abdu. The newly converted Abgar gathers his citizens to hear Thaddaeus preach and the story ends with the Christianisation of Abgar's kingdom.

This unlikely correspondence has occasioned much scholarly comment, the majority concerning its authenticity. Unsurprisingly there is almost unanimous consensus in rejecting the historicity of the story as it stands.<sup>3</sup> There are two positions though on whether any kernel of truth can be salvaged. The consensus position, argued most famously by Walter Bauer and more recently by Helmut Koester, holds that the text is entirely a third- or fourth-century fabrication.<sup>4</sup> A less popular position, held initially by Francis Burkitt and more recently by Judah Segal, tries to salvage a core of historical accuracy by arguing

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<sup>1</sup> My thanks to audiences at the University of Edinburgh, the University of Durham, the Classical Association 2015 and the Ghent 'Intercultural Exchange in Late Antiquity' in September 2015 for their thoughts on oral versions of this paper, and to Ted Kaizer and the *HThR* anonymous reviewers for their comments on a written draft.

<sup>2</sup> The identities of these two protagonists vary in different versions of the story; see John J. Gunther, 'The Meaning and Origin of the Name "Judas Thomas"', *Le Muséon* 93 (1980), 113-148. Han J.W. Drijvers, 'Facts and Problems in Early Syriac Speaking Christianity', *Second Century* 2.3 (1982), 157-175; at 160, believes Thaddaeus to be Eusebius' poor translation of the Syriac name Addai.

<sup>3</sup> Tellingly the story is found in neither the fourth-century writings of Ephrem, who lived in Edessa for ten years near the end of his life (though there is an oblique reference to the city being blessed by the Son through the hand of his disciple), nor the mid-sixth-century *Chronicle of Edessa*, which drew on the town archives in which the Abgar document was apparently stored. There is also no material record of Christianity for second- or third-century Syria. See Sebastian Brock, 'Eusebius and Syriac Christianity', in Harold Attridge & Gohei Hata, (eds.) *Eusebius, Christianity and Judaism* (Leiden/New York/Köln: Brill, 1992), 221-229.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 1972 [orig. 1934, repr. 1964, English trans. 1971, repr. 1972]) maintained the document was pure fantasy; not all those in agreement have expressed the point so forcefully. See also Helmut Koester, 'GNOMAI DIAPHOROI: The Origin and Nature of Diversification in the History of Early Christianity,' *HThR* 58 (1965) 279-318; Han J.W. Drijvers, 'Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten syrischen Christentum', *Symposium Syriacum* 1971. *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 197 (Rome: Pontificum Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1974), 291-308; Han J.W. Drijvers, *Cults and Beliefs at Edessa*, *EPRO* 82 (Leiden: Brill, 1980), 175-196; Han J.W. Drijvers, 'The Persistence of Pagan Cults and Practices in Christian Syria', in Nina G. Garsoïan, Thomas F. Mathews & Robert W. Thomson (eds.) *East of Byzantium: Syria and Armenia in the Formative Period* (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1980), 35-45. Drijvers, 'Facts and Problems', suggests that the Abgar correspondence was a deliberate response to Manichaeism; Alberto Camplani, 'Traditions of Christian Foundation in Edessa: Between Myth and History', *Studi e materiali di storia delle religioni* 75.1 (2009), 251-278, to Bardesanes.

that there was a historical conversion of an Abgar, but of Abgar VIII (Abgar the Great)<sup>5</sup> at the end of the second century.<sup>6</sup> Of these the first position is by far the more plausible.<sup>7</sup>

Equally interesting, but less frequently addressed, is the question of how and why the story is used. It survives in early forms in the fourth/fifth-century Syriac *Teaching of Addai* (extant in a manuscript likely dating from 500AD),<sup>8</sup> and the late fourth century diary of Egeria (*The Pilgrimage of Egeria* 17.1).<sup>9</sup> But the earliest extant version is found at the end of Book 1 of Eusebius of Caesarea's ten-book *Ecclesiastical History*, the fourth-century narrative in which the self-proclaimed first Christian historian recorded the first three hundred years of Christianity. Eusebius claims that the story comes from the archive at Edessa (*EH* 1.13.5).<sup>10</sup> But the presence of such an obviously apocryphal tale in our main narrative source for early Christianity, in which there is significant historical and religious investment, has been something of an embarrassment, and it has thus merited little attention in studies of Eusebius or his *Ecclesiastical History*.

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<sup>5</sup> In some older literature Abgar VIII is Abgar IX; see Brock, 'Eusebius and Syriac Christianity', 231 [n21].

<sup>6</sup> Francis C. Burkitt, *Early Eastern Christianity* (London, John Murray, 1904); modified in his later article 'Tatian's Diatessaron and the Dutch Harmonies', *JTS* 25 (1924), 113-130. See also Henry E.W. Turner, *The Pattern of Christian Truth*, (London, Mowbray, 1954); Leslie W. Barnard, 'The Origins and Emergence of the Church in Edessa during the First Two Centuries A.D.', *VC* 22 (1968), 161-175, e.g. at 162; Elio Peretto, 'Il Problema degli inizi del cristianesimo in Siria', *Augustinianum* 19 (1979), 197-214; Judah B. Segal, 'When did Christianity come to Edessa', in Barry C. Bloomfield (ed.) *Middle East Studies and Libraries: A Felicitation Volume for Professor J.D. Pearson* (London: Mansell, 1980), 179-191; Gunther, 'The Meaning and Origin of the Name "Judas Thomas"'; Andrew N. Palmer, 'King Abgar of Edessa, Eusebius and Constantine', in Hans Bakker (ed.), *The Sacred Centre as the Focus of Political Interest* (Groningen: E. Forsten, 1992). Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (London: Penguin, 2005), 279-280, leans cautiously towards this theory.

<sup>7</sup> Briefly, the second theory relies upon a conversion of Abgar VIII in the later second century, itself a doubtful proposition. This later conversion is largely based on the third century *Book of the Laws of the Countries*. But both the identification of this text's Abgar with Abgar VIII (based on the author seeming to speak of a contemporary) and the conversion itself (based on a phrase absent from Eusebius' own quotation of the passage in his *Preparation of the Gospel* 6.10.44 and therefore likely a later interpolation) are problematic. The Byzantine chronographer George Syncellus quotes Sextus Julius Africanus as describing his contemporary Abgar VIII as 'a holy man', but that phrase need imply nothing about either a conversion or its date.

<sup>8</sup> For the Syriac text and translation see George Howard, *The Teaching of Addai* (Chico, CA.: Scholars Press, 1981). On dating, see Timothy Barnes, 'The Date of the Teaching of Addai', paper given at Oxford Patristics 1983 [alas no longer extant]; Alain Desreumaux, 'La doctrine d'Addai, essai de classement des temoins syriaques et grecs', *Augustinianum* 23 (1983), 181-186; Brock, 'Eusebius and Syriac Christianity', 228; and Sidney H. Griffith, 'The Doctrina Addai as a Paradigm of Christian Thought in Edessa in the Fifth Century', *Hugoye* 6.2 (2003), 269-292.

<sup>9</sup> See John Wilkinson, *Egeria's Travels* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1999). Beyond these early recensions the Abgar tale has a long afterlife; the sources have been recently gathered and translated into German by Martin Illert, *Die Abgarlegende: Das Christusbild von Edessa* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007). In these later versions an image of Christ accumulates increasing importance to the detriment of the letter, which never acquired the same status as a relic. See further Averil Cameron, 'The History of the Image of Edessa: The Telling of a Story', *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 7 (1983), 80-94; and for a more speculative history Robert Drews, *In Search of the Shroud of Turin: New Light on Its History and Origins* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman & Allanheld, 1984).

<sup>10</sup> A later Armenian historian suggests the story derived from the fifth book of Sextus Julius Africanus, which John E. Grabe, *Spicilegium Syriacum Sanctorum Patrum* (Oxoniae: e Theatro Sheldoniano, 1698) proposed as Eusebius' source. This would of course seem to contradict Eusebius' own claim. Discussed in Illert, *Die Abgarlegende*, 20. On the Edessan archive and the extent of Eusebius' interaction with it, see e.g. William Adler, 'Christians and the Public Archive', in Eric Mason et al. (eds.) *A Teacher for All Generations: Essays in Honor of James C. VanderKam*. Vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill: 2012), 917-937; at 935-937, giving a reconstruction compatible with Grabe's suggestion; partly summarized in William Adler, 'The Kingdom of Edessa and the Creation of a Christian Aristocracy' in N.B. Dohrmann & A. Yoshiko Reed (eds.) *Jews, Christians and the Roman Empire: The Poetics of Power in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 43-62; at 48-52.

In fact there have been only two substantial discussions of the Abgar correspondence in Eusebius. Walter Bauer began his seminal *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, which set out his thesis that Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* systematically misrepresented early Christianity's "heretical" origins, with a discussion of Edessan Christianity. He hypothesised that the Abgar correspondence was a forgery by the fourth-century bishop Kune designed to establish apostolic origins for the orthodox tradition in Edessa and obscure Edessan Christianity's "heretical" origins. Kune, Bauer suggested, slipped the story to Eusebius, claiming to have found it in the archives of Edessa.<sup>11</sup> Eusebius is imagined as a passive dupe, ignorant of the Syriac world and easily convinced of the tale's authenticity. The story's inclusion in the *Ecclesiastical History* is thus ascribed to Kune's cunning and Eusebius' simplicity. Bauer's overall thesis met a mixed response,<sup>12</sup> but his thoughts on the Abgar correspondence fared rather better. So for example Sebastian Brock's article on 'Eusebius and Syriac Christianity' in the 1992 state-of-the-question collection of Harold Attridge and Gohei Hata followed Bauer's patronizing dismissal of Eusebius as the unwitting purveyor of a false tradition.<sup>13</sup>

The second major treatment was that of Alexander Mirkovic, who treated Eusebius as part of a wider study of the Abgar legend. Mirkovic argued that Eusebius included the correspondence on apologetic grounds in response to the publication by the emperor Maximin Daia of the forged *Memoranda of Pilate* towards the end of the Great Persecution (*EH* 9.5.1).<sup>14</sup> Eusebius intended the Abgar legend to defend the respectability of the Christian religion and its founder. He could hold up its picture of a pious god-fearing royal convert as a contrast to the persecutors of the fourth century. As the title of his work suggests, Abgar stands as a prototype for the Christian emperor Constantine to come.<sup>15</sup> Mirkovic suggested further that the tale served Eusebius' "theory of religions", since Abgar's conversion coincides with the decline of the Jewish state and marks Messianic times.<sup>16</sup> Here the Abgar correspondence is conceived as Eusebius' deliberately chosen weapon in an anti-pagan rhetoric.<sup>17</sup>

Bauer's and Mirkovic's treatments bookend modern scholarship on Eusebius and, while both are pioneering studies, they also neatly represent its two main shortfalls. Even setting aside the weak evidence for his forgery theory, Bauer allowed Eusebius no agency, damning him with faint praise as 'the learned and guileless bishop of Caesarea'.<sup>18</sup> This view of Eusebius as a simple historian abounds in studies of the *Ecclesiastical History*. Such a view was likely originally motivated by the theological need

<sup>11</sup> Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*, 35-6.

<sup>12</sup> See e.g. Daniel J. Harrington, 'The Reception of Walter Bauer's *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* during the Last Decade', *HThR* 73.1/2 (1980), 289-298; Thomas Robinson, *The Bauer Thesis Examined: Geography of Heresy in the Early Church* (Lewiston: Edward Mellen Press, 1988).

<sup>13</sup> Brock, 'Eusebius and Syriac Christianity', 212-234.

<sup>14</sup> Alexander Mirkovic, *Prelude to Constantine: The Abgar Tradition in Early Christianity* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2004), 90-1.

<sup>15</sup> Suggested briefly too in Andrew Palmer, 'The Place of King Abgar in the Scheme of Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*', *Bulletin de l'AEIAC* 8 (1998), 17-19; and Marlène Kanaan 'Jésus et le roi Abgar', in *Connaissance des Pères de l'Église* 94 (Paris: Éditions Nouvelle Cité, 2004), 12-20; at 15 (which share too Mirkovic's misunderstandings of Eusebius' context) and Marie Verdoner, *Narrated Reality: the Historia ecclesiastica of Eusebius of Caesarea* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2011), 171.

<sup>16</sup> Mirkovic, *Prelude to Constantine*, 96-7.

<sup>17</sup> Doron Mendels, *The Media Revolution of Early Christianity: An Essay on Eusebius's Ecclesiastical History* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 194-196, also briefly mentions the letters as part of Eusebius' promotion of mission as a marketing strategy to a pagan audience. For Mendels the letters' significance is their testimony that Christianity's mission began in Jesus lifetime and in the outer public sphere (and conforms with the instructions of Matthew 10.5-6, since Abgar approaches Jesus, not vice versa). This missionary significance is mentioned in passing too in Palmer, 'The Place of King Abgar', 17, and Kanaan, 'Jésus et le roi Abgar', 15.

<sup>18</sup> Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*, 11; at 36 he even condemns Eusebius' editorial skills, stating: 'If the latter had been inclined at all to examine his material critically, such thoughts must have been further from his mind than ever in this case.'

to rescue an important historical text from undue influence by an author of questionable orthodoxy. It was lent extra impetus in the twentieth-century by Timothy Barnes' demonstration that Eusebius wrote independent of Constantinian influence, allowing the rehabilitation of Eusebius as historian rather than imperial apologist.<sup>19</sup> But such neglect of Eusebian agency will not stand given recent work revealing Eusebius' own skills and motivations. A desire to rehabilitate Eusebius' neglected works, primarily the *Preparation for the Gospel* and *Demonstration for the Gospel*, has revealed Eusebius' considerable skills as writer and editor.<sup>20</sup> His sophisticated writing, judicious editing, careful framing and subtle structuring mean he can no longer be dismissed as a mere compiler. Eusebius was a writer, and his writings – composition and quotation alike – must be read with an eye to his literary project. But these new insights have yet to be extensively applied to the *Ecclesiastical History*.<sup>21</sup>

Mirkovic avoided this stumbling block, and was I think correct to see here a desire to rehabilitate Jesus' reputation in the eyes of fourth-century elites. But his discussion was hampered by misunderstandings concerning the circumstances of the *Ecclesiastical History*'s production. Mirkovic assumed both that the *Ecclesiastical History* was born of the "Great Persecution" and that it was intended for a pagan audience.<sup>22</sup> Both assumptions were flawed.<sup>23</sup> First, the text's dating has been much debated, but current consensus argues that it was produced in a series of four editions between 313 and 326, and largely written between 311 and 315/6. Eusebius mainly wrote after the western emperor Constantine's conversion to Christianity, but under the rule of his eastern colleague Licinius, whose attitude towards Christianity was rather more ambiguous.<sup>24</sup> He also wrote after the cessation of the Great Persecution (313,

<sup>19</sup> Timothy Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1981), at e.g. 140-141. The condemnation of Eusebius as court theologian was most famously expressed by Joseph Burckhardt, *Die Zeit Constantin's des Grossen* (Leipzig: E. A. Seemann, 1853 [rep. 1898]), for example at 326.

<sup>20</sup> See Aryeh Kofsky, *Eusebius of Caesarea against Paganism* (Leiden/Boston: Brill 2000); Aaron Johnson, *Ethnicity and Argument in Eusebius' Praeparatio Evangelica* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Sabrina Inowlocki, *Eusebius and the Jewish Authors: His Citation Technique in an Apologetic Context* (Leiden: Brill, 2006); Jeremy M. Schott, *Christianity, Empire, and the Making of Religion in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); and Sébastien Morlet, *La 'Démonstration évangélique' d'Eusèbe de Césarée: Étude sur l'apologétique chrétienne à l'époque de Constantin. Série Antiquité 187* (Paris: Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, 2009). On Eusebius' exegetical work see Michael Hollerich, *Eusebius of Caesarea's Commentary on Isaiah: Christian Exegesis in the Age of Constantine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999). The recent edited collection of Sabrina Inowlocki & Claudio Zamagni, (eds.) *Reconsidering Eusebius: Collected Papers on Literary, Historical and Theological Issues* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2011) explicitly excludes the *Ecclesiastical History*.

<sup>21</sup> Exceptions include Moneke Gödecke, *Geschichte als Mythos: Eusebs "Kirchengeschichte"* (Frankfurt am Main/New York: Peter Lang, 1987); Adele Monaci Castagno (ed.) *La biografia di origene fra storia e agiografia. Atti del VI Convegno di Studi del Gruppo Italiano di Ricerca su Origene e la Tradizione Alessandrina* (Villa Verucchio: Pazzini Stampatore Editore, 2004), 33-50, on Book 6 in particular; and Verdoner, *Narrated Reality*, an ahistorical narratological study containing many insightful comments but poorly translated from the Dutch. There are three articles on the *Ecclesiastical History* in Aaron Johnson, & Jeremy Schott, (eds.) *Eusebius of Caesarea: Traditions and Innovations* (Cambridge MA.: Harvard University Press, 2013): David DeVore, 'Genre and Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*: Toward a Focused Debate'; James Corke-Webster, 'Mothers and Martyrdom: Familial Piety and the Model of the Maccabees in Eusebius of Caesarea's *Ecclesiastical History*'; and Elizabeth C. Penland, 'The History of the Caesarean Present: Eusebius and Narratives of Origen'. See too the introductory volume Aaron Johnson, *Eusebius* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013).

<sup>22</sup> Mirkovic, *Prelude to Constantine*, 89-95.

<sup>23</sup> Based upon the old and superseded dating theories of Eduard Schwartz, *Eusebius' Werke* 2 (GCS 9.1, 1903; 9.2, 1908; 9.3, 1909) and Timothy Barnes, 'The Editions of Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*', *GRBS* 21 (1980), 191-201. See Mirkovic, *Prelude to Constantine*, 107-110.

<sup>24</sup> This follows Richard Burgess, *The Dates and Editions of Eusebius' Chronici Canones and Historia Ecclesiastica*, *JTS* n.s. 48.2 (1997), 471-504. A more recent one edition hypothesis has been proposed by Valerio Neri, 'Les éditions de l'Histoire ecclésiastique (livres VIII-IX): bilan critique et perspectives de la recherche', and Matthieu Cassin, Muriel Debié, and Michel-Yves Perrin, 'La question des éditions de l'Histoire ecclésiastique et le livre X', both in Sébastien Morlet & Lorenzo Perrone (eds.) *Eusèbe de Césarée. Commentaire, vol. 1: Études*

but 311 in Palestine). Most important, the significance of that event should not obscure the fact that the majority of Eusebius' life had been spent in the so-called "little peace of the church", a long period in which Christians had flourished in the Roman Empire. That, and not the "Great Persecution", had moulded Eusebius' attitude towards Rome.<sup>25</sup>

Second, Eusebius wrote not for a pagan audience but for a Christian one. This is clear from the *Ecclesiastical History*'s repeated assumptions of its readership's familiarity with and approval of Christian texts and concepts.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, these Christians were provincial elites. Eusebius himself was a member of that stratum of society - a senior cleric in Caesarea, one of Palestine's oldest and most Romanised cities.<sup>27</sup> The *Ecclesiastical History*'s high cost, syntactically complex Greek, and wealth of intertextual references to previous historical, literary and theological writings, indicate that it was designed for that same highly educated stratum of society.<sup>28</sup> These Christians then were both Roman citizens and residents of the culturally and intellectually Greek east. Eusebius did not write for readers with only a "Christian" identity; their values were also simultaneously Roman and their cultural standards Greek. Such was the audience to which Eusebius tailored his vision of the church.

The *Ecclesiastical History* is therefore not an apologetic text designed for pagan detractors. It is for Christian insiders who shared the cultural standards and values of those detractors. The difference might seem slight but it is significant. Eusebius was not on the back foot defending Christianity but taking a step forward, proposing a new picture of the church's past amenable to its new elite demographic. By shaping that audience's understanding of their own legacy he was attempting to mould the future of the church. Just as important, the means by which he sought to do so were those judged to best influence a Christian audience.

In this light I propose to take up afresh the Abgar correspondence. Eusebius' inclusion of it was not an arbitrary decision. He has little interest elsewhere in Syriac Christianity but here includes this lengthy anecdote in a prominent position.<sup>29</sup> In fact the story does not naturally fit there. The rest of Book 1 treats 'pre-history'; the church's spread under the earliest disciples begins in Book 2 - 'let us now look at events after his [Jesus'] ascension' (*EH* 2.pr.2).<sup>30</sup> The Abgar correspondence fits more naturally in Book 2 and in fact is awkwardly recapped there (*EH* 2.1.6-7). This prompted the plausible suggestion in Timothy Barnes' seminal *Constantine and Eusebius* that the Abgar correspondence was perhaps not in the

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*d'introduction* (Paris: Belles Lettres, Éditions du Cerf), 151-83, but critiqued by David DeVore in his review in *Zeitschrift für antikes Christentum* 18 (2014), 138-142.

<sup>25</sup> See e.g. Jean Sirinelli, *Les vues historiques d'Eusèbe de Césarée durant la période prénicéenne* (Dakar: Université de Dakar, Faculté des lettres et sciences humaines, 1961), 416-417; Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 136; Verdoner, *Narrated Reality*, 162. See however Johnson, *Ethnicity and Argument*, 153-197, arguing that Eusebius' *Preparation for the Gospel* cultivates ambivalence and even hostility towards Rome.

<sup>26</sup> Marie Verdoner, 'Überlegungen zum Adressaten von Eusebs *Historia ecclesiastica*', *Zeitschrift für antikes Christentum* 14 (2010), 362-78.

<sup>27</sup> On Eusebius' Caesarea, see Joseph Patrich, 'Caesarea in the Time of Eusebius', in Inowlocki & Zamagni *Reconsidering Eusebius*, with further bibliography. For more detail on the city by the same author, see Joseph Patrich, *Studies in the Archaeology and History of Caesarea Maritima: Caput Judaeae, Metropolis Palaestinae* (Leiden: Brill, 2011). See too Lee I. Levine, *Caesarea Under Roman Rule* (Leiden: Brill, 1975); and Avner Raban & Kenneth G. Holum (eds.), *Caesarea Maritima: A Retrospective after Two Millennia* (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

<sup>28</sup> For examples of Eusebius' complex intertextuality, see Corke-Webster, 'Mothers and Martyrdom', 51-81.

<sup>29</sup> See Brock, 'Eusebius and Syriac Christianity', 212. Other passing references to the region include Bardesanes the Syrian (*EH* 4.30.1-3), a letter on the Paschal controversy from the bishops in Osroëne and its environs (*EH* 5.23.4) and the Christianisation of Armenia (*EH* 9.8.2).

<sup>30</sup> Translations my own throughout unless otherwise indicated. Greek text of Eusebius from Gustave Bardy, *Eusèbe de Césarée, Histoire ecclésiastique* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1:1952; 2:1955; 3:1958 [repr. 3:1967]).

*Ecclesiastical History*'s first edition.<sup>31</sup> But this only pushes the question of its inclusion back a stage. We must still ask what motivated it. Eusebius himself encourages us to do so in the words that close both the anecdote and Book 1: 'let these things be put here by me, in their proper place (κατὰ καιρὸν), translated literally from the Syriac tongue, and not without good reason (καὶ οὐκ εἰς ἄχρηστον)' (*EH* 1.13.22). The Abgar correspondence is prominent by design.<sup>32</sup>

I suggest that Eusebius positions the "Abgar correspondence" at the end of Book 1 as a programmatic introduction to the *Ecclesiastical History*'s subsequent nine books. Book 2 begins: 'as many matters as were necessary to get out of the way by way of introduction to this *Ecclesiastical History*... we have treated in the Book before this one, briefly presenting examples' (*EH* 2.pr.1). If Eusebius has deliberately included the Abgar narrative here then, it is because he considers it introductory material. More specifically, it is a programmatic introduction to his attempt to remould Christian history for its new fourth-century context. And the earlier into Christianity's past he could push that remoulding process, the more effective the picture would be for a conservative audience in the Graeco-Roman world.

The Abgar correspondence presented Eusebius with an opportunity to rebrand Christianity's figurehead, Jesus himself.<sup>33</sup> I argue below that this rebranding had three aspects. First, Eusebius emphasised the story's epistolary aspects to make Jesus a literate writer, and a correspondent of kings. Second, Eusebius highlighted this literate and pastoral Jesus over and against the Passion-focused proto-martyr set up as figure of imitation in so many second and third century Christian texts. Third, the Edessan setting allowed Eusebius to introduce his stylized picture of the interaction between Christianity and Rome. Rome is absolved of responsibility for Jesus' death and even given credit as his avenger. And Christians are established as being (and as always having been) those in the Roman Empire best capable of upholding its interests and values. Beyond this, I suggest too that this programmatic anecdote can serve as a lens for how we should approach the rest of the *Ecclesiastical History*. As the touchstone for Christian mimetic hierarchies, this new-look Jesus is our window onto Eusebius' more thoroughgoing re-imagination of Christian models of authority in his *Ecclesiastical History*. In the Abgar correspondence Eusebius gave his fourth century audience a man for their times, and us a key to his historical project.

## II. The Epistolary Jesus

"If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue  
Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch"

In his treatment of the Abgar correspondence Eusebius focuses on the verbatim quotation of the letters exchanged between Jesus and Abgar. We read, 'there is nothing like also hearing the letters themselves (οὐδὲν δὲ οἶον καὶ αὐτῶν ἐπακοῦσαι τῶν ἐπιστολῶν), taken up from the archives by me and translated in their own words from the Syriac tongue thus' (*EH* 1.13.5). I suggest that this image of a Jesus capable not only of written correspondence but written correspondence with a king is of central importance to Eusebius, and enabled him to respond to elite concerns over the status of early Christians.

Comparison of Eusebius' account with the story's independent transmission in the *Doctrine of Addai* demonstrates the importance of Jesus' act of writing to Eusebius.<sup>34</sup> In the *Doctrine of Addai*, though the

<sup>31</sup> Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 129-30; see also 346[n15].

<sup>32</sup> Noted without the prior discussion in Palmer, 'The Place of King Abgar', 17.

<sup>33</sup> This paper thus attempts for Eusebius' Greek version of the tale what Griffith, 'The *Doctrina Addai* as a Paradigm of Christian Thought', for example at 271, does for the Syriac *Teaching of Addai*.

<sup>34</sup> Their independence is strongly indicated by, among other factors, the fact that the Syriac version is different from the Syriac translation of Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*, which cannot therefore be assumed as the basis for the *Teaching of Addai*. Hence the consensus position that *The Teaching of Addai* preserves the original Syriac document Eusebius used as his source; see e.g. Brock, 'Eusebius and Syriac Christianity', 213; Drijvers, 'Facts and Problems,

content is almost identical,<sup>35</sup> the form of the messages is different.<sup>36</sup> Abgar still writes, but Jesus replies orally: ‘When Jesus received the letter at the house of the chief priest of the Jews, he said to Hannan, the keeper of the archives: ‘Go and say to your lord, who has sent you to me’ (*Doctrine of Addai* f.3b; see too f.20b).<sup>37</sup> The orality of the reply is clear again a few lines later when we read, ‘When Hannan, the keeper of the archives, saw that Jesus spoke in this way to him’.<sup>38</sup> This oral reply is written down by Hanan, an archivist, and delivered to the king. The version of the story Eusebius quotes in Greek quotation in the *Ecclesiastical History* is ambiguous - the use of forms of ἐπιστέλλω in ‘an apostle of Jesus has come here, as he sent (ἐπέστειλέν) to you’ (*EH* 1.13.11) and ‘it occurred to him thus, that it was the one about whom Jesus had sent (ἐπέστειλεν) to him’ (*EH* 1.13.11-12) could refer to either oral or written missives.<sup>39</sup>

Eusebius’ own framing passages in the *Ecclesiastical History* on the other hand are anything but ambiguous. Eusebius notes that when Abgar wrote to him Jesus ‘did not accept the summons, but did judge him worthy of a personal letter (ἐπιστολῆς γοῦν αὐτὸν ἰδίας καταξιοῦ)’ (*EH* 1.13.3).<sup>40</sup> He then introduces Jesus’ reply as ‘THE WRITTEN RESPONSE OF JESUS (ΤΑ ΑΝΤΙΓΡΑΦΕΝΤΑ ΥΠΟ ΙΗΣΟΥ) THROUGH ANANIAS THE COURIER TO ABGAR THE TOPARCH’ (*EH* 1.13.9). Eusebius’ sentence transitioning between his quotations of the letter and of the account of Thaddaeus’ adventures in Edessa similarly emphasises the mutual epistolarity: ‘To these letters (Ταύταις δὲ ταῖς ἐπιστολαῖς) are joined still further these things...’ (*EH* 1.13.11). Eusebius insists upon Jesus as letter-writer, and makes a written letter the vehicle of his authority.<sup>41</sup>

This radical picture of Jesus intervenes in a debate over Jesus’ literacy and status that went back to Christianity’s earliest days. The New Testament witnesses two schools of thought - one affirming Jesus’

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160; contra. Eduard Schwartz, ‘Zu Eusebius Kirchengeschichte: II, Zur Abgarlegende’, *ZNW* 4 (1903), 61-66; at 64; Desreumaux, ‘La Doctrine d’Addai’, 186. Brock, ‘Eusebius and Syriac Christianity’, 215-221 helpfully prints the two texts in parallel.

<sup>35</sup> The other major difference in the *Teaching of Addai* is a blessing on Edessa appended to Jesus’ reply (f. 3b). More generally, Eusebius makes no mention of the image of Christ that would become so important in later versions of the story. Steven Runciman, ‘Some Remarks on the Image of Edessa’, *Cambridge Historical Journal* 3.3 (1931), 241-2, argues, in part on the basis of Eusebius’ *Letter to Empress Constantia*, that Eusebius excised the image of Christ [see n4]. It seems more likely that the image was simply a later addition since it is absent in Egeria’s diary too.

<sup>36</sup> Noted in passing in Ilaria L.E. Ramelli, ‘Possible Historical Traces in the *Doctrina Addai*’, *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 9.1 (2006), 51-127; at 63 [n38].

<sup>37</sup> Translation of the Syriac from Howard, *The Teaching of Addai*.

<sup>38</sup> The state of the extant evidence means that we cannot be completely sure that the original Syriac document did not have a written reply from Jesus, subsequently turned into an oral reply in the *Teaching of Addai*. It is more likely though that this is a Eusebian editorial decision given his interest in the letter format. For the direct comparison see Brock, ‘Eusebius and Syriac Christianity’, 214; noted too by Drijvers, ‘Facts and Problems’, 162. Drijvers concludes that, ‘The alternative of letter or oral reply is no fundamental question. A dictation given by Jesus and written down by Hanan differs only slightly from a written answer’. But for Eusebius, I suggest, the difference is more significant than Drijvers allows.

<sup>39</sup> The translation in Hugh J. Lawlor & John E. L. Oulton (eds.) *Eusebius. The Ecclesiastical History and the Martyrs of Palestine*. Vol. 1 (London: Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, 1927-28) misleadingly refers to a written response (‘An apostle of Jesus is come hither, even as He wrote to thee’; ‘he suspected that it was he of whom Jesus wrote’).

<sup>40</sup> DeVore, ‘Greek Historiography, Roman Society, Christian Empire’, 1-5, has argued convincingly that this refusal makes Jesus’ and Abgar’s relationship an example of the classic trope of philosophers invited (and declining) invitations from foreign kings.

<sup>41</sup> Some manuscripts of the *Ecclesiastical History* (ERBD) have an extra section that emphasises this further; it includes for example the phrase ‘it is also worth hearing the letter, only a few lines but powerful (ὀλιγοστίκου μὲν πολυδυνάμου δὲ ἐπιστολῆς), sent by Jesus to him through the same letter-carrier (διὰ τοῦ αὐτοῦ γραμματοκομιστοῦ)’ (*EH* 1.13.9). Discussed in Lawlor & Oulton, *Eusebius*. Vol. 2, 57-58; Greek text taken from Eduard Schwartz, *Eusebius Kirchengeschichte* (Leipzig, J.C. Hinrichs, 1932); see 33 for apparatus.



scribal literacy and one denying it. Mark's characterisation of Jesus as a 'carpenter (ὁ τέκτων)' (Mark 6.3),<sup>42</sup> for example, became in Matthew 'son of a carpenter (ὁ τοῦ τέκτονος υἱός)' (Matthew 13.55), a change that likely reflects the latter's discomfort with low status implied by the profession.<sup>43</sup> That other Christians shared Matthew's mixed feelings is indicated by the assimilation of Mark's reading to Matthew's in a number of manuscripts (most notably P<sup>45</sup>) and the removal of τέκτων completely in a sixth-century Palestinian Syriac tradition as well as in Luke (Luke 4:22).<sup>44</sup> Luke elsewhere makes Jesus' literacy clear, equating him with the scribal-literate class (Luke 2:41-50 et al.) and even describing him using a scroll (Luke 4:16-30).<sup>45</sup> Concerns over Jesus' literacy and its implications for his status continue in later texts. John's story of Jesus writing in the dust while preventing the stoning of the adulteress has been identified as a third-century interpolation intended to provide definitive evidence of precisely the literacy the story leaves unclear.<sup>46</sup> The late second-century Apocryphal *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* bypasses the question by presenting a Jesus capable of learned teaching despite a lack of education (e.g. 15.3-4).<sup>47</sup> This debate centred on whether Christians could claim a literate authority for their founder.

The discussion was not merely academic. Jesus' perceived low status and lack of education made Christians an easy target for Christianity's critics.<sup>48</sup> This was most obvious in the second century author Celsus' critique of Christianity.<sup>49</sup> Celsus famously crowed that Christians evangelise 'no one educated, no one wise, no one sensible (μηδεις... πεπαιδευμένος, μηδεις σοφός, μηδεις φρόνιμος)' (*Against Celsus* 3.44),<sup>50</sup> but 'anyone ignorant, or senseless, or uninstructed, or childish (εἴ τις ἀμαθής, εἴ τις ἀνόητος, εἴ τις ἀπαιδευτος, εἴ τις νήπιος)' and 'only the foolish and the low-born and the mindless and the low and women and children (μόνους τοὺς ἡλιθίους καὶ ἀγεννεῖς καὶ ἀναισθήτους καὶ ἀνδράποδα καὶ γυναῖα καὶ παιδάρια)'. He characterized Christians as 'the most uneducated and the most rustic (τοὺς ἀπαιδευτοτάτους τε καὶ ἀγροικοτάτους)' (*Against Celsus* 3.55; see too 1.62; 3.50 and similarly Minucius, *Octavius* 12; Galen, *Of the Difference of Pulses* 24; 3.3). These barbs found their force in large part because of Christianity's founder. Celsus mocked Jesus as coming 'from a Jewish village and a rustic,

<sup>42</sup> Greek text of the New Testament from Kurt Aland et al. (eds). *The Greek New Testament*. Fourth Revised Edition (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2007).

<sup>43</sup> While the change could also be due to Matthew's theological concerns over Mark's characterization of Jesus as Mary's son, or simply his observation that Jesus never engages in actual labour, scholarly consensus favours the interpretation advanced above. See discussion and extensive bibliography in Chris Keith, *Jesus' Literacy: Scribal Literacy and the Teacher from Galilee* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2011), 134-139.

<sup>44</sup> See Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London/New York: United Bible Societies, 1971), 34; 88-89.

<sup>45</sup> See Keith, *Jesus' Literacy*, 139-145.

<sup>46</sup> See Chris Keith, *The Pericope Adulterae, the Gospel of John, and the Literacy of Jesus* (Leiden, Brill, 2009).

<sup>47</sup> Discussed in Keith, *Jesus' Literacy*, 161-3.

<sup>48</sup> See discussion in Stephen Benko, *Pagan Rome and the Early Christians* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986), 148. Judgments on Jesus' low origins continue in the modern era, for example in John D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992); and John D. Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994). In contrast, see Paul Foster, 'Educating Jesus: The Search for a Plausible Context', *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 4.1 (2006), 7-33.

<sup>49</sup> The characterization of Celsus in Robert L. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1984 [repr. 2003]) 94-125, as a 'conservative intellectual' nicely characterises his suitability as an exemplar for our purposes, since it was precisely those criticisms emerging from traditional stereotypes that Eusebius most needed to address. Moreover, it was Celsus who first paid close attention to the historical Jesus and thus tied common suspicions about Christianity to its founder. See further A. Miura-Stange, *Celsus und Origenes: Das Gemeinsame ihrer Weltanschauung* (Giessen: Topelmann, 1926); Carl Andreson, *Logos und Nomos. Die Polemik des Kelsos wider das Christentum* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1955); and Eugene V. Gallagher, *Divine Man or Magician? Celsus and Origen on Jesus* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1982).

<sup>50</sup> Greek text of Celsus from Marcel Borret, *Origène. Contre Celse* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1:1967; 2:1968; 3-4:1969).

poor, spinner woman (ἀπὸ γυναικὸς ἐγγωρίου καὶ πενιχρᾶς καὶ χερνήτιδος) (*Against Celsus* 1.28; see too 1.27; 1.29 & 6.34) who ‘hired himself out in Egypt as a workman because of poverty (διὰ πενίαν)’ (see also *Against Celsus* 1.38) before acquiring magical abilities and ending up emphatically ‘a carpenter by trade (τέκτων τὴν τέχνην)’ (*Against Celsus* 6.34). Similarly Lucian’s satiric Peregrinus could rise to prominence among the Christians precisely because of the naivety of those following a crucified Palestinian (*Passing of Peregrinus* 11).<sup>51</sup> These barbs were fueled by ambiguity surrounding Jesus’ education and status.

Elite Graeco-Roman adherents in the fourth century desperately needed a Jesus who reflected on them better than did the poor, bastard carpenter. I suggest that Eusebius uses the Abgar correspondence to provide precisely that.<sup>52</sup> Here Jesus is no illiterate carpenter – he is a writer, a member of that elite epistolary club whose methods of communication marked them as the Empire’s movers and shakers.<sup>53</sup> Jesus correspondent is equally noteworthy. While Celsus’ caricature of Jesus has him slaving as hired help in Egypt and associating with society’s dregs, Eusebius’ Jesus is the authoritative correspondent of a king, and a king who has sought him out in beseeching tones. Eusebius provides the definitive evidence that earlier Christian discussion had lacked.<sup>54</sup> By his inclusion and careful framing of the Abgar correspondence Eusebius could respond effectively to common criticisms of Christianity as a religion of society’s lowest strata that had drawn strength from suspicions about Jesus’ own humble origins.

### III. The Martyred Jesus

“If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew  
To serve your turn long after they are gone”

Eusebius’ picture of this epistolary Jesus is as interesting for what it omits as for what it highlights. It is a remarkable but rarely observed fact that Eusebius pays surprisingly little attention to the crucifixion in the *Ecclesiastical History*. Jesus’ death is mentioned only in passing in the summary of Abgar’s healing (*EH* 1.13.2) and of Thaddaeus’ preaching (*EH* 1.13.19), as well as in an earlier quotation from Josephus (*EH* 1.11.8). Instead Book 1’s treatment of the historical Jesus focuses on Jesus’ ministry (*EH* 1.10.1-6) and the call of his disciples (*EH* 1.10.7; 1.12.1-5). But it ends not with Jesus on the cross but in correspondence with a king. The Abgar pericope is by far the longest Eusebius tells about Jesus and comes precisely where we would expect details of his death. I suggest that Eusebius is here correcting what he perceived to be earlier Christian overemphasis on Jesus’ suffering and death.

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<sup>51</sup> A more positive view of Jesus’ intelligence does seem to have existed among pagans, particularly in the later period. Augustine observes that pagan critics seek to deny Jesus’ divinity and make him only ‘the wisest of men (sapientissimum virum), *On the Harmony of the Gospels* 1.8.’ I note again though that this acknowledgement is also supposedly part of a wider pagan query as to ‘why the lord has written nothing himself (cur ipse Dominus nihil scripserit), *On the Harmony of the Gospels* 1.7.11; 1.7.12.’ Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, 144-145 and 151-3, suggests that Augustine had Porphyry in view here, as he did in *City of God* 19.23. Equally, Eusebius might have had Porphyry in mind when he sets out to argue against those who consider Christianity an ‘unreasoning faith (ἄλόγῳ δὲ πίστει), *Preparation for the Gospel* 1.3.1.’ Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* 4.13 seems to acknowledge a tension between exactly two such opposing pagan attitudes to Jesus’ intelligence.

<sup>52</sup> We might compare Eusebius’ treatment of the historical Jesus in *Demonstration of the Gospel* 3.3-7; e.g. at 3.7.3.

<sup>53</sup> Compare the possibility muted in Foster, ‘Educating Jesus’, 31, that the description of Jesus’ education in *The Gospel of Thomas* 6.15 is imported from Graeco-Roman models of primary education, as described for example by Quintilian, *Institutes of Oratory* 1.1.25.

<sup>54</sup> It is true that Jesus’ epistle does not match the length or elaboration of much contemporary elite correspondence. But it did provide clear proof of Jesus’ literacy, which had been a major prop to allegations of low status. And in addressing the latter the prominence of the correspondent likely made up for the brevity of the correspondence.

From Christianity's earliest days Jesus was a model of imitation for early Christians. And from Mark's Passion-focused Gospel on, it was Jesus' suffering and death that caught the Christian imagination and led to the 'early Christian preoccupation with mimetic suffering'.<sup>55</sup> The motif was perhaps expressed most strongly in the zealous letters of Ignatius, who declared that his discipleship had begun only when he began to suffer (*Epistle to the Romans* 5).<sup>56</sup> But a similar sentiment was repeated in numerous subsequent Christian writers (e.g. Tertullian, *On Flight from Persecution* 7; Origen, *Exhortation to Martyrdom* 36). Such suffering-based *imitatio Christi* found its most prevalent form in early Christian martyr narratives of the second and third centuries. These tales of Christians' trials, sufferings and deaths regularly described their protagonists as imitating Christ.<sup>57</sup> Many martyrs achieved cult status – literally – at least in part because their authority was affirmed by their echoing the suffering and death of Christ himself.

This martyr literature was not designed simply to memorialise. Recent scholarship has argued that the authors of these texts were constructing identity models for their readers. The martyrs' powerful liminality, one foot already in the grave and thus with God, made them powerful models to guide Christian readers' self-conceptions and behaviours. In particular, martyr texts often became a literature of resistance, born of Christianity's struggle as a minority religious group under the routine brutality of Roman hegemony.<sup>58</sup> In the martyr narrative that bears her name Perpetua, for example, in her rejection of first her father and subsequently the Roman governor Hilarianus, became a beacon of resistance towards the family and the wider state it represented. She and her fellow martyrs symbolised Christian rejection of the status quo on the micro and macro scale.<sup>59</sup> And they do so by appeal to Jesus. In her autobiographical dreamed rejection of a symbolic serpent Perpetua appeals to the name of Christ (*The Passion of Perpetua* 4.6) just as in the editorial narrative that frames it she defiantly meets the eyes of the crowd as she was led to the arena 'as a wife of Christ (ut matrona Christi)' (*The Passion of Perpetua* 18.2).<sup>60</sup> Much martyr literature questioned and ultimately invalidated the legitimacy of the Roman enterprise, and its protagonists were the symbolic vehicles of that reactionary message.

This early Christian fascination with martyrs was a mixed blessing for Eusebius. On the one hand he saw their potential for providing the kind of powerfully emotive content that would fascinate readers. Here springing from the page were readymade heroes perfect for bringing his new narrative history alive.<sup>61</sup> But the martyrs also posed twin problems. Eusebius wrote after the cessation of persecution in 311 and so had little use for their pedigree as symbols of resistance. As was noted above, he was committed to compatibility, not antagonism, between Christianity and Rome. Second, Christians' perceived enthusiasm for suffering and death was a further element in Christianity's image problem among Graeco-Roman

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<sup>55</sup> Candida Moss, *The Other Christs: Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3.

<sup>56</sup> For a survey of varying early Christian use of *imitatio Christi* see Moss, *The Other Christs*, 19-44.

<sup>57</sup> This is not to reject the warnings about homogenising a geographically and chronologically disparate set of texts; see e.g. Candida Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom: Diverse Practices, Theologies, and Traditions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 7.

<sup>58</sup> See Brent D. Shaw, 'Body/Power/Identity: Passions of the Martyrs', *JECS* 4 (1996), 269-312; Kate Cooper, 'The Voice of the Victim: Gender, Representation, and Early Christian Martyrdom', *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library* 80 (1998), 147-157; Robin Darling Young, *In Procession Before the World: Martyrdom as Public Liturgy in Early Christianity* (Milwaukee, WI.: Marquette University Press, 2001); Elizabeth Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Judith Perkins, *Roman Imperial Identities in the Early Christian Era* (London: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>59</sup> The literature on Perpetua is vast. See especially Brent D. Shaw, 'The Passion of Perpetua', *Past & Present* 139.1 (1993), 3-45; and Kate Cooper, 'A Father, a Daughter, and a Procurator: Authority and Resistance in the Prison Memoir of Perpetua of Carthage', *Gender and History* 23.3 (2011), 685-702.

<sup>60</sup> Latin text taken from Cornelius I.M.I van Beek, *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitas* (Nijmegen: Dekker and Van de Vegt, 1936).

<sup>61</sup> See for example the powerful media value of martyrs suggested by Mendels, *The Media Revolution*, 51-109.

elites. Of the eleven “pagan” authors who comment on Christianity between 110 and 210, for example, all but one mentions their propensity for martyrdom.<sup>62</sup> Lucian’s *Passing of Peregrinus*, perhaps the most famous example, condemned Christians because ‘they think little of death (καταφρονοῦσιν τοῦ θανάτου)’ and the majority deliver themselves to it readily (ἐκόντες)’ (*Passing of Peregrinus* 13) and mocked the titular character for his voluntary end (see too e.g. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 11.3; Epictetus, *Discourses* 4.7.6; Minucius, *Octavius* 8).<sup>63</sup> Celsus too speaks of the Christian tendency to ‘abandon it [the body] to punishments as if it were valueless (ὡς ἄτιμον)’ (*Against Celsus* 8.49). As above, such criticisms drew their strength from Jesus’ own death. Lucian referred scathingly to ‘that crucified sophist (τὸν ἀνεσκολοπισμένον ἐκεῖνον σοφιστήν)’; Celsus to how the Christians’ ‘teacher was nailed to a cross (ὁ διδάσκαλος αὐτῶν σταυρῷ ἐνηλώθη)’ (*Against Celsus* 6.34; see too e.g. 2.44). Eusebius wanted to reassure his fourth-century elite audience that suffering was not a prerequisite for discipleship.

To do so Eusebius needed to reimagine Christianity’s martyrs as symbols of values more useful to his context. His own descriptions of martyrs’ experiences in the *Ecclesiastical History* alter the oppositional motifs of earlier martyr narratives.<sup>64</sup> But doing so effectively meant countering the prevailing tendency of *imitatio Christi* in early Christian martyr literature. As Candida Moss notes, ‘In order for the presentation of the martyr to be effective, the rereading of Jesus must necessarily remain in close contact to those traditions with which it assumes its audience to be familiar.’<sup>65</sup> In other words, to modify *imitatio Christi* Eusebius had to change his audience’s picture of Christ. The Abgar correspondence allowed Eusebius to do precisely this. Including it at the end of Book 1 introduces a different picture of the historical Jesus and therefore a new point of reference for imitation of him. In the Abgar story Jesus’s epistolary habit, pastoral care and power of conversion shift the focus off the suffering, death and implicit resistance that would have sat uncomfortably with Eusebius’ elite fourth-century Graeco-Roman audience, and undermine those opponents who critiqued Christians’ mortal-obsession on the basis of their founder.

#### IV. Jesus and the Edges of Empire

“Yours is the Earth and everything that’s in it”

Eusebius largely neglects the details of Jesus death. The same cannot be said of those responsible for it. Eusebius’ treatment of the Abgar correspondence echoed earlier treatments of the crucifixion in which Jesus’ killer(s) had taken centre-stage (the Gospels’ attempt to blame the Jews and exculpate Rome for a clearly Roman execution for example has long been acknowledged). In his initial epistolary request Abgar notes, ‘I have heard too that the Jews are murmuring against you and are plotting to harm you’ (*EH* 1.13.8) and offers a safe haven as payment for the desired healing.<sup>66</sup> And in the early books of the

<sup>62</sup> Jakob Engberg, ‘Martyrdom and Persecution – Pagan Perspectives on the Prosecution and Execution of Christians c. 110-210’, in Jakob Engberg, Uffe Holmsgaard Eriksen, & Anders Klostergaard Petersen (eds.) *Contextualising Early Christian Martyrdom* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2010), 96.

<sup>63</sup> Greek text from Austin M. Harmon, *Lucian: Volume V* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1969). For comment see e.g. Hans D. Betz, ‘Lukian von Samosata und das Christentum’, *Novum Testamentum* 3 (1959), 226-237; and Mark J. Edwards, ‘Satire and Verisimilitude: Christianity in Lucian’s “Peregrinus”’, *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 38.1 (1989), 89-98; Benko, *Pagan Rome*, 30-53.

<sup>64</sup> For Eusebius’ stylised martyrs in his prequel to the *Ecclesiastical History*, the *Martyrs of Palestine*, see James Corke-Webster, ‘Author and Authority: Literary Representations of Moral Authority in Eusebius of Caesarea’s *The Martyrs of Palestine*’, in Peter Gemeinhardt & Johan Leemans (eds.), *Christian Martyrdom in Late Antiquity: History and Discourse, Tradition and Religious Identity*. Arbeiten zur Kirchengeschichte 116 (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 2012), 51-78.

<sup>65</sup> Moss, *The Other Christs*, 5-6; see too 107.

<sup>66</sup> In the *Teaching of Addai* this anti-Jewish sentiment is tempered by various apparently sympathetic gestures towards the Jews. Given that the gradual accretions to the *Teaching of Addai* enhance rather than subdue the anti-

*Ecclesiastical History* Eusebius repeatedly refers to Jewish guilt for the crucifixion he otherwise says so little about (*EH* 1.1.2; 1.11.8; 2.5.6; 2.6.3; 3.5.3; 3.5.6; 3.7.1). Pontius Pilate is not even mentioned. This lays the groundwork for subsequent attempts to blame Jews for Christians' deaths and shift attention away from Roman involvement.<sup>67</sup>

But the Abgar correspondence allows Eusebius to go further than simply exculpating Rome. When Thaddaeus eventually visits Abgar the latter claims, 'I have believed in him [Jesus] to such an extent that I even wished to take a force and massacre the Jews who crucified him, had I not been held back from this by the dominion of the Romans (διὰ τὴν βασιλείαν τὴν Ῥωμαίων)' (*EH* 1.13.16). This implies not only that the Romans are innocent of Jesus' death but that they are also the agents of the Jews' punishment. Eusebius' reader has been expecting such a backlash since the opening lines of the *Ecclesiastical History*, where the initial list of promised topics includes 'the things immediately falling upon the whole Jewish nation after their plot against the Saviour' (*EH* 1.1.2). Abgar's comment glosses this by making clear that the punishment of the Jews is to be left to the Romans; a punishment that duly follows. When he later comments on how Vespasian's siege ends the plots, seditions and wars in Jerusalem, Eusebius concludes emphatically that, 'such then were the things executed by the divine vengeance (τὰ ἐκ τῆς θείας μετῆι δίκης) against the Jews for the things they undertook against Christ' (*EH* 2.6.8).<sup>68</sup> In Eusebius' vision the Romans are not simply innocent of Christ's death; they avenge it.<sup>69</sup>

In this Eusebius implies that the Romans are acting as agents of God.<sup>70</sup> This too is a rhetorical move repeated later in the *Ecclesiastical History*. In Eusebius' description of the Great Persecution in Book 8, where he must work very hard to explain away Roman agency for Christian suffering, Eusebius implies that the Christians are being divinely punished for their internal failings (*EH* 8.1.7-9; see too 7.30.21; 9.8.15; 10.4.14; 10.4.33-4; 10.4.59) and thus that the Romans serve as the agents of divine vengeance.<sup>71</sup> William Tabbernee, in a discussion of Eusebius' "theology of persecution", argued that Eusebius viewed

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Jewish sentiment, it is at least possible that Eusebius has removed this apparently pro-Jewish detail. See further Han J.W. Drijvers, 'Jews and Christians at Edessa', *Journal of Jewish Studies* 36 (1985), 88-102; at 91-2.

<sup>67</sup> Eusebius cannot however be accused of simple anti-Semitism. See Jörg Ulrich, *Euseb von Caesarea und die Juden. Studien zur Rolle der Juden in der Theologie des Eusebius von Caesarea* (Berlin/NewYork: Walter de Gruyter, 1999) and in particular his distinction between "Hebrews" and "Jews" in Eusebius' thought; see too Verdoner, *Narrated Reality*, 145-7. Eusebius will, however, unhesitatingly tar the Jews if it enables him to exculpate the Romans (and note that it is Jews rather than Hebrews who are so blamed) and does so repeatedly in the *Ecclesiastical History* (see especially *EH* 4.15.26; 4.15.29; 4.15.41-43). William Tabbernee, 'Eusebius' "Theology of Persecution": As Seen in the Various Editions of His Church History', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 5.3 (1997), 319-334; at 323, posits that blaming the Jews was the earliest stage of Eusebius' evolving views of "persecution". On Eusebius' treatment of the Jews in the *Preparation for the Gospel* and *Demonstration of the Gospel* see Aryeh Kofsky, 'Eusebius of Caesarea and the Christian-Jewish Polemic', in Ora Limor & Guy Stroumsa, *Contra Iudaeos. Ancient and Christian Polemics between Christians and Jews* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1996), 59-83.

<sup>68</sup> This also fits Roman ideas of "just war" as motivated by retaliation or revenge; see further Sigrid Albert, *Bellum iustum: Die Theorie des "gerechten Krieges" und ihre praktische Bedeutung für die auswärtigen Auseinandersetzungen Roms in republikanischer Zeit* (Kallmünz: Lassleben 1980).

<sup>69</sup> In this he goes further even than the later author of the *Teaching of Addai* who imagines Abgar writing indignantly to the emperor Tiberius 'concerning that which the Jews did with respect to the Cross' (*Teaching of Addai* f. 24a).

<sup>70</sup> On Eusebius' understanding of salvation history the destruction of the Temple was also important in confirming that Moses' law and the old covenant had been superseded; see e.g. *Demonstration of the Gospel* 1.6.39-40, discussed in Kofsky, 'Eusebius of Caesarea and the Christian-Jewish Polemic', 82.

<sup>71</sup> The idea of suffering as God's judgment on his own people is of course a common Old Testament motif, and Eusebius' debt to that motif is evident in his extensive quotation and paraphrase from Jeremiah and the Psalms. Robert Grant, 'Eusebius and Imperial Propaganda', 664, suggests however that Eusebius might also have inherited the idea from *1 Clement* 3, which Eusebius certainly knew (*EH* 3.16.1; 3.38.1; 4.23.11; 5.6.3).

church and state as independent in the earlier drafts of the *Ecclesiastical History* but after experiencing the Great Persecution came to believe that God's purposes could be achieved through state agents.<sup>72</sup> But the implication that the Romans were God's agents in punishing the Jews as early as Book 1 suggests this view was more fundamental to Eusebius' approach.<sup>73</sup> The Abgar correspondence thus establishes a positive role for Romans in Christianity's past at a programmatic point in Eusebius' narrative.

We can go still further. The phrase 'the dominion of the Romans' hints at a solution to the persistent question as to why Eusebius includes here Syriac material outside his normal sphere of interest. The *Ecclesiastical History* is a history of Christianity within the Roman Empire; the Abgar correspondence, given its size and prominent position, a significant exception.<sup>74</sup> Though firmly part of the Roman Empire by Eusebius' own day, at the time the story was set Edessa was not. The argument that this was the only material from the region available to Eusebius is not only from silence but also simply unlikely, since Eusebius supposedly spoke Syriac, and the Abgar correspondence came from a larger archive (*EH* 1.13.5). Likewise one cannot claim that Eusebius was unaware that Edessa was not under Roman control in the first century, since he begins the story by introducing 'king Abgar, holding power most notably over the nations beyond the Euphrates (τῶν ὑπὲρ Εὐφράτην ἔθνῶν ἐπισημότευα δυναστεύων)' (*EH* 1.13.2) and later characterizes Edessa as 'at this time a city ruled by kings (τὸ τινικάδε βασιλευομένην πόλιν)' (*EH* 1.13.5). The references to both the Euphrates, the Empire's symbolic eastern border (e.g. Herodian, *Roman History* 4.10.2), and to independent rule make clear that Eusebius knew this area to be beyond Rome's purview.

This is confirmed by again comparing Eusebius' account with the story's independent transmission in the *Teaching of Addai*. There parts of the text depict Abgar anachronistically as a Roman governor, and Edessa as a Roman city. For example, Abgar mentions his respect for 'the covenant of peace which was established by me as by my forefathers with our lord Caesar Tiberius' (*Teaching of Addai* f.5a; see too f.24b), likely reading back into the first century a third century political arrangement. Edessa is also described as 'the territory of the Romans' (*Teaching of Addai* f.23a-b).<sup>75</sup> There is no such ambiguity in Eusebius. I therefore suggest that part of the attraction of the Abgar correspondence for Eusebius was precisely because it afforded him the opportunity to comment on the Roman Empire from the outside.<sup>76</sup>

In Eusebius' story Abgar, an outsider, has not only requested that a teacher from within the Empire visit him, but also offered him half of his kingdom.<sup>77</sup> Subsequently in conversation with that leader's representative he has explicitly expressed his respect for Roman hegemony. Moreover Eusebius initially identifies Abgar as a 'king (βασιλε-)' – a standard term he also applies to Roman emperors he approved of –<sup>78</sup> but then when introducing the letters twice designates him a 'toparch (τόπαρχ-)'.<sup>79</sup> Eusebius thus draws attention to Abgar's status as an independent ruler before Jesus' correspondence, and his respect

<sup>72</sup> Tabbernee, 'Eusebius' "Theology of Persecution"', 326.

<sup>73</sup> Tabbernee's schema is also flawed since it relies on a chronological compositional sequence rendered obsolete in the very year he published his article, when Burgess, 'The Dates and Editions', demonstrated that Eusebius' first edition included not Books 1-7 but Books 1-9.

<sup>74</sup> Noted in passing by Illert, *Die Abgar Legende*, 18-19.

<sup>75</sup> See discussion in Griffith, 'The *Doctrina Addai* as a Paradigm of Christian Thought', 274 [n16]; also Ramelli, 'Possible Historical Traces', 53; 95.

<sup>76</sup> Something similar is hinted at by Marie Verdoner, *Narrated Reality*, 171, who suggests that Eusebius is here emphasizing Christianity's universality.

<sup>77</sup> I note that Eusebius' stresses that Jesus' ministry is associated with Judaea (*EH* 1.9.2-1.10.1; 1.13.1), and that the letter is sent explicitly to Jerusalem (*EH* 1.13.5) – i.e. places within imperial control.

<sup>78</sup> Noted for example in Verdoner, *Narrated Reality*, 161.

<sup>79</sup> Brock, 'Eusebius and Syriac Christianity', 320 [n11].

for Roman hegemony after it.<sup>80</sup> The significance of this is best appreciated, I suggest, if we consider the associations of Edessa for Eusebius' elite fourth-century audience.<sup>81</sup>

Edessa's location just beyond the Euphrates on the Empire's very eastern edge put it on the *de facto* border with Parthia, Rome's old enemy. This liminal position lent it a certain ambivalence. On the one hand it was an important stopping point on eastern trading routes and a key bastion against eastern invasion.<sup>82</sup> As such it was a desirable city for the Romans, who made repeated attempts to form or force alliances with Edessa. But Edessa's fluctuating loyalty to Rome and Parthia – it changed government or allegiance eight times during the imperial period – meant it was also a constant source of unease to elite Romans. It is this twofold symbolic capital into which I suggest Eusebius is tapping.

It is worth briefly reviewing Rome's chequered relationship with Edessa since it reflects this simultaneous desire and fear. Rome's earliest interactions with Edessa, when the region was firmly linked to Parthia, are illustrative. When Tigranes of Armenia was defeated by Sextilius in 69BC, he was allied with Abgar I (Plutarch, *Life of Lucullus* 25.5-6). But his successor Abgar II kept the throne through successful negotiations with Pompey (Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 37.5.5). Already in these two first encounters we see the two sides of Edessa's relationship with Rome. A decade later, Pompey's colleague Crassus' great defeat in the region, which became such an important touchstone in the Roman collective memory, supposedly occurred because 'Abgar of Osroëne did them the greatest outrage' (Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 40.20.1; exaggerating the account in Plutarch, *Life of Crassus* 21-22).<sup>83</sup> A Roman attempt in 49BC to install the client king Meherdates in Armenia was later apparently stalled 'by the deceit of Acbarus' (Tacitus, *Annals* 12.12), who deliberately delayed him and later abandoned him in battle (*Annals* 12.14). In explaining Abgar's and Meherdates' other allies' defections when bribed by Meherdates' opponent Gotarzes, Tacitus notes with a characteristically curt curled lip that 'barbarians prefer acquiring kings from Rome than keeping them'. The reality of events here is less significant than Edessa's growing reputation as valuable and untrustworthy in equal measure.

This remains true in the high empire. When Trajan scouted the region, Cassius Dio reports that initially the Abgar of the day (VII) hedged his bets between Rome and Parthia (Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 68.18.1). Despite supposedly then declaring himself loyal to Trajan – again, a plea readily accepted by the Roman leaders – his subsequent rebellion endangered the over-extended emperor (Cassius, *Roman History* 68.29.4) leading Trajan's general Lusius to sack and burn Edessa (Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 68.30.2).<sup>84</sup> Here again Edessa marks the symbolic boundary whose loyalty even Rome's "best emperor"

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<sup>80</sup> In the *Teaching of Addai*, Abgar's initial interest in Jesus comes while an embassy from Edessa is visiting a Roman governor, a detail absent from Eusebius' account. This might well be a later addition, but it is noteworthy that the majority of such additions are at the end of the narrative, not the start. It is therefore possible that Eusebius has removed this detail, perhaps to emphasise the agency of Jesus in bringing Edessa and Rome closer together.

<sup>81</sup> Another contributory motivation might be Eusebius' desire to boast about Christianity's reach at this stage, as suggested in Verdoner, *Narrated Reality*, 171. DeVore, 'Greek Historiography, Roman Society, Christian Empire', 4, suggests that discussions of foreign kings were a standard circumlocution for speaking obliquely about emperors. But Eusebius will happily speak explicitly about emperors, good or bad, elsewhere.

<sup>82</sup> For Edessa's position on multiple trade routes see Judah B. Segal, *Edessa: The Blessed City* (Oxford/New York: Clarendon Press, 1970), 3-4; 29-31; 42; for the military significance of its location, 5-6. See further Han J.W. Drijvers, 'Hatra, Palmyra and Edessa. Die Städte der syrisch-mesopotamischen Wüste in politischer, kulturgeschichtlicher und religionsgeschichtlicher Beleuchtung', *ANRW* II.8 (Berlin/New York, 1977), 864; and Fergus Millar, *The Roman Near East* (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 1993), 437-488.

<sup>83</sup> It should be noted that contrary to Dio's account, Plutarch's *Life of Crassus* ascribes little blame to the Edessenes or their king. On Eusebius' possible knowledge of Dio, see Andrew Carriker, *The Library of Eusebius of Caesarea* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2003), 151-154.

<sup>84</sup> Brock 'Eusebius and Syriac Christianity', 10-11, associates the death of Abgar with this revolt, since the likely date of Abgar's death is 115/116, twenty six years later than the date of 89/90 recorded in the eighth-century Syriac

struggled to secure. Two years of Roman military occupation were followed by the reemergence of Edessan rulers, Ilour/Yalour and Pharnataspat whose loyalty again seems divided (Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 68.33; John Malalas, *Chronicle* 11.6-7). Numismatic evidence certainly suggests both that Osroëne was again closer to Parthia than Rome, and that there were tensions between pro- and anti-Roman factions in the city.<sup>85</sup> The suggestion that Antoninus Pius took a personal interest in the Edessan throne certainly suggests its continuing importance to Rome (*Historia Augusta, Life of Antoninus Pius* 9.6). The subsequent return of Ma'nu VII to the throne was aided by the siege and capture of Edessa by Lucius Verus in 165/6, supported by a pro-Roman faction within the city (e.g. Lucian, *On How to Write History* 22; *Historia Augusta, Life of Verus* 7). But this produced no lasting stability. In 194 Edessa attacked Nisibis, in alliance with Adiabene, sparking reprisals from Septimius Severus.<sup>86</sup> Severus' retaliation 'against the barbarians' (*Roman History* 75.1.1) is described by Cassius Dio in identical terms to Trajan's travails in the region as coming 'out of a love of glory' (cf. *Roman History* 68.17.1).<sup>87</sup> Septimius Severus' intervention successfully annexed the region and created the new provinces of Mesopotamia and Osroëne. But Edessa's mild treatment after its revolt, in which Abgar kept his throne and met a lavish reception in Rome, indicates their continued importance to Rome (Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 80.16.2).<sup>88</sup> Edessa remained the symbolic boundary of Rome's vanity and failure in the east.

This unease concerning Osroëne continued even after Caracalla (somewhat deceptively) claimed it for Rome in 212/3 (Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 78.12.1).<sup>89</sup> Caracalla himself was assassinated in the region in 217 while preparing for an eastern campaign (having set out from Edessa for Carrhae in Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 79.5.3-5 and the *Historia Augusta, Life of Caracalla* 6.6-7.2; on an excursion from Carrhae in Herodian, *Roman History* 4.13.3).<sup>90</sup> At the death of Alexander Severus in 235 a successful revolt against Maximinus Thrax is attributed to Edessan archers (Herodian, *Roman History* 7.1.9-10). The Byzantine historian Syncellus recalls that unrest involving the usurpers Uranius and Antoninus

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*Chronicle of Zuqnin* (also called the *Chronicle of Ps-Dionysius of Tell-Mahre*). Either Abgar was its instigator and killed by the Romans, or a victim of the rebels. See further Steven K. Ross, *Roman Edessa: Politics and Culture on the Eastern Fringes of the Roman Empire, 114-242 CE* (London/New York, Routledge, 2001), 34.

<sup>85</sup> See discussion in Ross, *Roman Edessa*, 36-37, disagreeing with Drijvers, *Cults and Beliefs at Edessa*. While the coins of King Ma'nu under Verus and Marcus Aurelius carry the legend "friend of the Romans" and images of the two Roman emperors, earlier bronze coins depict a temple or a bust of a Parthian king (potentially Vologaeses III).

<sup>86</sup> The nature of this act is unclear; Ross, *Roman Edessa*, 46-50, considers it an attempt to oust the Romans from the region entirely, rather than an act in support of Septimius' rival Niger.

<sup>87</sup> On Septimius Severus in Dio see Fergus Millar, *A Study of Cassius Dio* (Oxford: Oxford Clarendon Press, 1964), 138-150.

<sup>88</sup> The extent of "punishment" is unclear; see further Ross, *Roman Edessa*, 50-53, and the review article by Ted Kaizer, 'The Near East in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods between Local, Regional and Supra-Regional Approaches', *Scripta Classica Israelica* 22 (2003), 283-295; at 290-291.

<sup>89</sup> On this deceit see Millar, *A Study of Cassius Dio*, 154. On the dating and impact of this change see Fergus Millar, 'The Roman *Coloniae* of the Near East: A Study of Cultural Relations' in Heikki Solin & Mika Kajava (eds.) *Roman Eastern Policy and Other Studies in Roman History* (Helsinki: Finnish Society of Sciences and Letters, 1990), 7-58; at 46-50; reprinted in Hannah M. Cotton & Guy M. Rogers (eds.) *Rome, the Greek World, and the East: The Greek World, The Jews and the East* (Chapel Hill/London: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 164-222; at 208-213. On the inscriptional evidence see in particular Richard Duncan-Jones, 'Praefectus Mesopotamiae et Osrhoenae', *Classical Philology* 64.4 (1969), 229-233 and 'Praefectus Mesopotamiae et Osrhoenae: A Postscript', *Classical Philology* 65.2 (1970), 107-109.

<sup>90</sup> Caracalla's trip might have been motivated by a memorial for Crassus' earlier defeat and betrayal in the region; see Susan P. Mattern-Parkes, 'The Defeat of Crassus and the Just War', *The Classical World* 96.4 (2003), 387-396; at 393 [n.39]. For further discussion see Olivier Hekster & Ted Kaizer, 'An accidental tourist? Caracalla's fatal trip to the temple of the Moon at Carrhae/Harran', *Ancient Society* 42 (2012), 89-107. A speech of Severus Alexander claiming that 'I have taken back the lands between the rivers - those of Mesopotamia of course - abandoned by that foul brute' (*Historia Augusta, Life of Severus Alexander* 56.6) is too vague for certainty but may refer to further troubles in the region under Elagabalus.



centred on Edessa (Syncellus 1.674-5; see too Zosimus 1.12).<sup>91</sup> Finally, Valerian's infamous defeat at the hands of Shapur I supposedly occurred during the latter's siege of Edessa (according to the Greek text of Shapur I's inscription, section 9-11).<sup>92</sup> Again, whether these calamities in fact involved Edessa or not, it is telling that they were remembered as doing so. Though the region as a whole was troublesome to Rome it is consistently Edessa associated with Rome's nadirs.<sup>93</sup> Edessa had become an appropriate setting for tales of treachery and woe.

By the time Eusebius wrote the *Ecclesiastical History* in the early fourth century Edessa had been part of the Empire for over a century (though its status had changed in the Diocletianic reshuffle).<sup>94</sup> But its reputation was long established and further exacerbated in the third century. It was this simultaneous desire and fear with which Eusebius' readers will have associated the region. In this light the Abgar correspondence acquires fresh significance. Where Roman emissaries, generals and emperors had consistently struggled to secure the loyalty of Edessa and its rulers, in Eusebius' account Christianity's founder is actively sought out by Abgar V and voluntarily offered half of his kingdom. Later in the story Abgar bows to Jesus' representative to the amazement of his court: 'Abgar prostrated himself (προσεκύνησεν) before Thaddaeus, and all those standing by were astounded' (*EH* 1.13.14; cf. Philippians 2.10). Such prostration in the east sent a potent political message. Jesus achieves easily what Rome's representatives had struggled to. Moreover, he is said to have done so at a time when historically the emperor Tiberius had been seeking the loyalty of precisely such eastern border-states (see e.g. Tacitus, *Annals* 6.31-37; 41-44).

Eusebius was here again in dialogue with a long-running concern of early Christian self-representation.<sup>95</sup> Celsus opens his *A True Doctrine* with the statement that there are some associations 'which are obscure – as many as are practiced against the common laws (παρὰ τὰ νενομισμένα)' (*Against Celsus* 1.1). Celsus' prime charge throughout is that Christian minds and allegiances run counter to Rome and her interests (see e.g. *Against Celsus* 8.17; 8.73; 8.75; also Minucius, *Octavius* 8; 12; Porphyry in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.19.7; and *Preparation for the Gospel* 1.2.1-4). Celsus' critique reveals that behind such barbs lies the fear of an emperor 'abandoned alone and deserted, and the earth's affairs falling to the most lawless and most savage barbarians' (*Against Celsus* 8.68).<sup>96</sup> Christians were thought to desire and risk the ruin of the Empire. As with Celsus' other critiques, he traces this back to Jesus, triumphantly labeling the latter's famous comment on the impossibility of serving two masters 'a factious utterance (στάσεως... φωνήν)' (*Against Celsus* 8.2; see too 3.5). Elsewhere he describes Jesus as 'the founder of their faction (αὐτοῖς τῆς στάσεως ἀρχηγέτης)' (*Against Celsus* 8.14). Even Tacitus' famous suggestion that Christians were convicted for their 'hatred of the human race' (*Annals* 15.44) comes after mention of Jesus' execution by sentence of a Roman procurator.<sup>97</sup> As we saw above, much Christian martyr literature of the second and third centuries had embraced that oppositionality. For Eusebius and his elite Graeco-Roman audience such an accusation therefore remained uncomfortable.

<sup>91</sup> Traditional scholarship believed there was further Edessene unrest when Abgar X regained the throne briefly towards the end of the first half of the third century, a thesis based upon a switch from Greek to Syriac in the documentation of the period. Ross, *Roman Edessa*, 69-82, however demonstrates on the basis of recently discovered papyri that Gordian III gifted this land to Abgar (indicating further Rome's favour to the region in spite of the recurring trouble).

<sup>92</sup> See Richard N. Frye *The History of Ancient Iran* (München: Beck, 1984).

<sup>93</sup> And indeed discussion of the region may have conjured up the city, if Osroëne indeed derives from the native name of Edessa, Orhay. Discussed in Segal, *The Blessed City*, 9-10.

<sup>94</sup> Timothy Barnes, *A New Empire of Diocletian and Constantine* (Cambridge MA./London: Harvard University Press, 1982), 206; 221-222.

<sup>95</sup> Benko, *Pagan Rome*, 23-24, notes well the significance for Romans of Christianity's associations with the Jews, whose political relationship with Rome in the first and second centuries AD was notably fractious.

<sup>96</sup> Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, 117-125; at 125.

<sup>97</sup> Latin text from John Jackson, *Tacitus: The Annals* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1937).

The Abgar correspondence helped Eusebius assuage this charge as it had those concerning Christians' low status and penchant for self-destruction. Eusebius' belief that the Empire's expansion was a divine aid to apostolic mission is well established (see e.g. *Demonstration of the Gospel* 3.7.33-55) and the Abgar correspondence confirms this.<sup>98</sup> But it also allows Eusebius to suggest that the reverse is true – that Christianity has always furthered the purposes of Empire. In Eusebius' reimagining Jesus and Thaddaeus successfully Christianise Edessa and are freely offered its rulers' loyalty in the early first century, where in reality Edessa's inclusion in the Empire was a tortured process not completed until the third century. The Christians are here better able to achieve the purposes of Rome – ensuring the security of this vital but problematic region – than their non-Christian contemporaries. The Christians are not the barbarians here; nor do they risk exposing the Empire to them. Instead they embody Rome's civilising tendency. Rome's interests and values are and always have been best served by its Christian inhabitants. That basic principle undergirds the entire *Ecclesiastical History*. It is perhaps best expressed in words Eusebius quotes from Melito of Sardis:

‘For our philosophy formerly flourished among the barbarians, but having appeared among the nations in the great age of your ancestor Augustus it became most of all an auspicious blessing for your kingdom (τῇ σῇ βασιλείᾳ αἴσιον ἀγαθόν). For thereafter the strength of the Romans has grown to great and splendid heights... it was for the good of a kingdom well begun that our message blossomed (τοῦ πρὸς ἀγαθοῦ τὸν καθ’ ἡμᾶς λόγον συνακμάσαι τῇ καλῶς ἀρξαμένη βασιλείᾳ)...’ (EH 4.26.7-8)

The Abgar correspondence demonstrated the truth of this bold claim. Eusebius introduced Abgar in grand terms we have already briefly touched upon not as a minor client king but as ‘most notably holding power over the nations beyond the Euphrates’ (EH 1.13.2).<sup>99</sup> Such is the audience's introduction to the eastern power broker who so willingly offers Jesus his loyalty and his kingdom.<sup>100</sup>

## V. Conclusion

“And - which is more - you'll be a Man, my son!”

This article has been concerned with the motivations not for the Abgar correspondence's original composition - which must remain the subject of conjecture - but for its inclusion at the end of Book 1 of Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*. It is not there simply because Eusebius was duped into including it. Rather it stood at this programmatic moment, just as the history of the church proper was primed to begin, as Eusebius' defining picture of Christianity's founder for his early fourth century audience. This story represents Eusebius' definitive intervention in a series of debates about the nature of the historical Jesus and its implications for later generations of Christians. The poor carpenter celebrated for his sacrificial suffering at the hands of misguided Roman principalities and powers is gone. Instead Eusebius presents a literate figure, the correspondent of kings and aligned with the interests of Rome. This reimagining provided Eusebius' elite Graeco-Roman audience with a history and a founder sturdy enough to withstand the stinging barbs of those critics whose prejudices and aesthetics they may well have shared.

But in writing for a Christian audience Eusebius intended more than just a response to certain criticisms. Like Kipling's poem the Abgar correspondence presents an ideal to which its audience can and should aspire. And the significance of this new-look Christ resonates beyond Book 1. The *Ecclesiastical History*

<sup>98</sup> See e.g. Mirkovic, *Prelude to Constantine*, 103-4.

<sup>99</sup> Interestingly, Tacitus similarly exaggerates, labeling Abgar ‘king of the Arabs (rexque Arabum)’ (Tacitus, *Annals* 12.12). On the actual (rather more limited) range of Edessan authority, see Segal, *The Blessed City*, 23-24.

<sup>100</sup> The other named Edessan Thaddaeus heals, ‘Abdu son of ‘Abdu, was also likely of political significance – either a leading officer or perhaps heir apparent (though this is clearer in the *Teaching of Addai* f.4a). See further Segal, *The Blessed City*, 19.

as a whole presents a series of shining biographical exemplars of Christian heroes. And as with earlier texts celebrating the Christian heroes of previous generations, an implicit mimetic hierarchy encouraged the *Ecclesiastical History*'s readers to mimic earlier Christians who were themselves mimicking Christ.<sup>101</sup> The reader is to emulate the Christian leaders and heroes throughout the *Ecclesiastical History* who themselves echo the new-look Jesus of Book 1. In other words the Abgar correspondence was Eusebius' starting point for a fundamental reimagining of Christian authority.

Eusebius' epistolary Jesus, correspondent of kings, is the model for three centuries of Christian leaders marked out primarily by their intellectual qualities, whose extended correspondence with each other and with the great and the good of their day does not just fill the pages of the *Ecclesiastical History* but is the visible evidence of the worldwide church itself. This Jesus whose ministry and mission overshadow his martyrdom will be imitated in the *Ecclesiastical History* by three centuries of Christian martyrs distinguished as much for their pastoral care as for their suffering and resistance. And this Jesus who meets such welcome and success with the king of Edessa, the symbolic representative of a region key to Roman interests whose allegiance Rome had long fought to acquire, is merely the first of three centuries of Christians who exemplify Rome's values and further her interests more effectively than their non-Christian contemporaries. The Abgar correspondence gives genuinely "Christian" pedigree to a stylized model of authority writ large throughout Eusebius' ten-book magnum opus. In the *Ecclesiastical History* Eusebius is not just presenting a new-look model of the church, its leaders and their relationship with Rome to his elite audience. He is suggesting that it has always looked that way.<sup>102</sup>

As a programmatic example of Eusebius' vision of Christian authority then, the rebranding of Jesus via the Abgar correspondence should be a catalyst to a new scholarly approach to the *Ecclesiastical History*. As a case study it is a powerful example of the shortcomings of previous scholarly trends. We cannot dismiss Eusebius' agency with Bauer, rest content with views inspired by Barnes of Eusebius as honest historian and thus reliable quarry for modern historians, or assume that Eusebius' literary project was a defense against hostile pagan audience like Mirkovic. Instead we must read for Eusebius' active re-imagining of Christianity at this watershed moment in history. And the Abgar correspondence points us towards what must be the two foci of our rereading. First, that Eusebius sought to direct Christianity's transformation from the inside. This he achieved via a thoroughgoing redefinition of what qualified Christian leaders, and ultimately emperors, for office. Second, that Eusebius wanted to write a history of Christianity fit for the Roman Empire. That meant presenting the church not just as compatible with Rome, as had earlier apologists, but as its best representative and, ultimately, its natural heir.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> This model is employed by Moss, *The Other Christs*, who takes it from Elizabeth Castelli, *Imitating Paul: A Discourse of Power* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 1991).

<sup>102</sup> Teresa Morgan, 'Eusebius of Caesarea and Christian Historiography', *Athenaeum* 93,1 (2005), 193-208, argues that the *Ecclesiastical History* is not a narrative of evolution but a history of a church that has replicated itself unchanged since its earliest days.

<sup>103</sup> My current monograph project explores in more detail this vision and the means by which Eusebius achieves it.